

Missed Chance

By Michael A. Stackpole; Illustrations by Mike Vilardi

Corran Horn smiled broadly as the R2 droid's muted warble came to him from back in the darkened interior of the temporary hangar. "Yes, Whistler, you have done a good job of disguising this place." In his absence the droid had busied himself by strewing all manner of debris inside the abandoned vehicle shed. Between that and the growth of the purple djorra vine across the front of the shed, no one would guess that the structure hid the only X-wing fighter on Garqi.

Corran swung under the ship's sleek nose and squat-walked back to where the little green and white droid stood. Things had been moved around since he'd last visited Whistler and Corran suspected he was only seeing the latest in a long line of decorating schemes. "I'm sorry I haven't visited sooner, but the whole city is going quite insane about Rebel activity. The way everyone is being watchful, you'd think some slicers grafting New Republic slogans and graphics onto computer screens and public data displays was the same as murder."

The droid extended his I/O jack and plugged it into the port on a small datapad resting atop a can oozing an oily gray substance. The screen flicked to life and displayed the blade assembly for an X-wing's centrifugal debris extractor. A chirp ran from low to high as the droid's head swung from the image around to Corran.

The pilot blushed, then shook his head. "No, I haven't figured out how to get the part out of the Imperial Guards' possession. With the Rebel activity around here they've not slackened their security the way they normally would. Finding the spare parts and those proton torpedoes on the *Star's Delight* was the biggest thing to happen to Imps on this backwater, and it got Prefect Barris all hot to root out the Rebels here. I don't know who he thinks that will impress -- the Emperor is dead and there's enough infighting on Coruscant that we even get word of it out here."

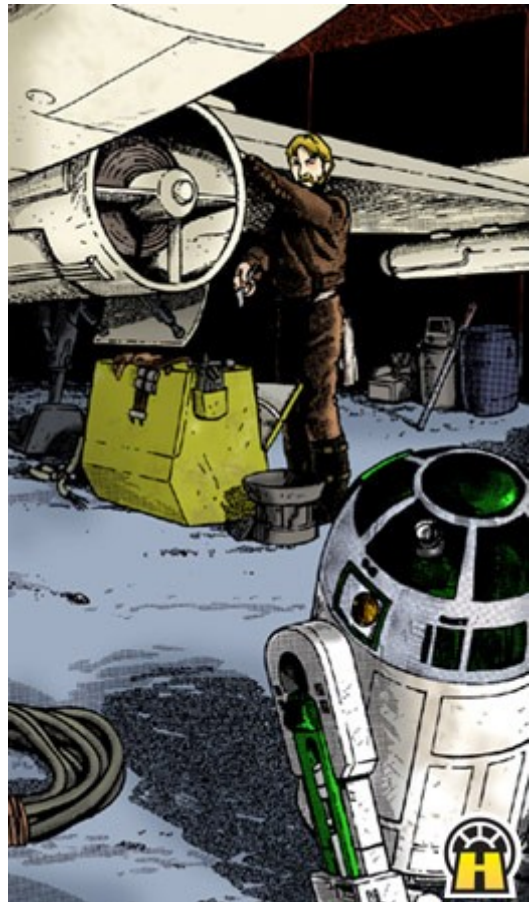
The droid's whistle scolded Corran as the image of the debris extractor faded into the crest of the New Republic.

"No, it's not a question of joining the Republic or not -- and we've gone over this before. There is *no* Rebel activity here. The 'Rebels' they think they have are kids -- students at Garqi Ag University. They couldn't help me get those parts away from Imps if I gave them months of instruction. Moreover, they'd get killed in the attempt." Corran shook his head adamantly. "Look, this is my problem. Captain Nootka brought those torpedoes because he thought he could sell them to me, or move them to his Rebel contacts elsewhere. They got him caught, got his crew arrested and his ship impounded. I *might* owe it to him to try to spring him, but doing that without having this ship up and flying is not going to work."

As he spoke, Corran reached up and ran a hand along the side of the X-wing. It shared the green and white color scheme of the droid, though both of them could have used a few paint touch-ups. The fighter had been Corran's during his time with the Corellian Security Force, and Whistler had been his co-pilot and partner in countless missions to stop smugglers and other troublemakers from disrupting life in the Corellian system.

Whistler let the datapad's screen go dark, producing a mournful tone as he did so.

"I know, Whistler, I miss taking those night flights, too." When Imperial entanglements made remaining in CorSec impossible, he took off with the ship and the droid. His purpose in coming to Garqi had been to lie low and avoid drawing Imperial attention to himself. Despite the fact that flying the X-wing put his life in jeopardy, he could no more refrain from flying than he could refrain from breathing -- though he did make all of his flights at night to make it more difficult to locate him and his ship.



And dodging the local troops was simplicity itself. If I'd not sucked a rdava-bird into the starboard engine on that last flight, I'd still be flying and no one would think Garqi was a hotbed of Rebel activity. He sighed. "Now I'm stuck here because rich kids who have decided they want to shock their parents have started playing Rebel. It's all a game to them."

Again the droid scolded him with a sharp whistle.

"You're right, Dynba Tesc probably doesn't think of it as a game, but it's her own fault that she got caught last night. The Imps around here are not exactly stormtrooper caliber, but she left a trail that even our old CorSec Imperial Liaison officer could have followed." He reached out and patted the droid gently on the head. "She'll spend some time in the local jail, then get kicked loose. Yes, she'll be interrogated, but they'll see she knows nothing and let her go. I'm sure of it."

Whistler tooted another question.

"Yes, if she were in danger, I would do what I could -- but not because she's a Rebel. I've got nothing to do with the New Republic and just because the Empire hates the both of us doesn't mean we're allies."



Corran frowned heavily. "The Rebels might have killed the Emperor, and they're saying they have the last living Jedi on their side, but they're still a far cry from having the Empire down and out. My priority is to lay low while they attract more attention than I do. The Rebellion, such as it is, has come to Garqi, and that means it's time we're out of here."

He held a hand up. "No, no more protests. In fact, I don't want to hear any more Rebellion squawk out of you, got it? I'll be spending all my time working to maintain my cover *and* to keep my eye on the extractor. I'll figure out a way to get it, then we're on our way."

Corran started to turn away, but the droid caught hold of his sleeve with his pincer attachment. "What is it, Whistler?"

The droid hooted derisively at him.

"Yeah, well maybe back on the job I wouldn't have been so blasé about Dynba Tesc's problem, but now we're running from the law, not working for the law." He pulled his arm free, but looked back at the droid and hung his head. "Okay, no promises, but I will see what I can do. I look to take care of us first, though, right?"

Whistler's head spun around as he crowed triumphantly.

"Yes, saving her and her friends would look good in my datafile." Corran nodded to the droid as he headed back out of the hangar. *Unless the Empire is the one to put the notation in it, but they'd have to catch me first. With that extractor, I can avoid them -- and that is the notation in my datafile I most want to see.*

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Prefect Mosh Barris sat back in the overstuffed chair that he decided was almost as deep and as black as the depression in which he found himself. He felt old and tired, as if he were at a point in the universe from which any other direction was *up*. The only thing Garqi had to recommend it as a post had been its utter isolation and insulation from the Empire, and even that shield had worn thin in his year's tenure as the military prefect under the current -- and seemingly ever-absent -- Imperial governor.

"You see, Eamon," he began, "I had not expected her to make it easy for us, but this Tesc woman's ability to resist narco-interrogation is incredible. She steadfastly claims she knows nothing of the Rebellion and claims no connection with Lai Nootka or his *Star's Delight*. Even so, she seems to have an encyclopedic understanding of

the phantom X-wing's flights -- which she claims is because studying it was a hobby for her -- and full knowledge of her crime. Of this 'Xeno' she claims is the ringleader of her slicer circus we have no record, and her speculation that he is a member of the *Delight's* crew that eluded capture is one more black mark against us."

Eamon Yzalli nodded slightly as he slid the silver tray with the refilled snifter of Cassandran choholl. "Regrettable, sir. On the whole, one could be led to believe by all this that she knows nothing beyond what she has already revealed."

Barris took the glass and warmed it in his hands for a moment. "Looks can be deceiving, Eamon. Looking at her I see a woman who is more a child than adult -- but that is standard among the adults here. This damned world is so fertile that the great agri-combines need nothing more than droids to tend the crops and accountants to tend the profits. The people of Garqi are pampered and unrealistic, hardly fodder for the Rebellion."

He drank in just enough of the Cassandran liquor to fill the hollow of his tongue, and let it pool there for as long as it took for the fragrant, fruity vapors to fill his sinuses. "Of course, *that* is what she wants us to believe."

"What is, sir?"

"That she is too innocent to be part of the Rebellion." Barris looked up at his green-eyed aide. "I cannot and will not be tricked by her. A long time ago I did nothing in a situation that called for action. I was deceived and I have paid for it since. It was a long time ago ... but I have told you of it before, yes?"

The blond man returned to the sideboard and replaced the tray before turning and nodding to his master. "I do recall having been told something of the *alien* incident, sir."

"Yes, the *alien* incident." Barris stared darkly into the depths of the amber liquor. An alien -- both humanoid and intelligent -- had run him and his men around in circles on a planet that was -- if it were possible -- even more of a backwater than Garqi. This alien had killed his men, had brought down a TIE fighter and had even slain two stormtroopers using technology he stole from the Imperials in combination with native plants and animals. *I advocated a planetary bombardment to rid us of this menace, but Captain Parck invited this murderous creature to join the Empire. The Emperor chose that time to forego his normal xenophobia. He advanced Parck's career, gave this Thrawn a career, and started me on the long road from one humiliating post to another.*

Barris had hoped the Emperor's hatred for him would die with the man, but the Imperial institutional memory seemed to cherish the idea of taking him lower and lower. The man who had ousted Barris from his last post had been disciplined for having allowed the last Jedi Knight to escape Tatooine and murder the Emperor. That man's punishment had pushed Barris even further from the Galactic Core to the mottled red and purple world that was Garqi.

"I swore, Eamon, I swore that I would never let an opportunity to act decisively and forcefully slip away without redeeming myself. Uncovering and smashing the Rebels here on Garqi would allow me to do that."

"If I may be permitted, sir, you have an abundance of time in which to learn from Dynba Tesc what you need to accomplish this end. You have only had her for two days. She will break."

Barris tossed back the choholl and grit his teeth against the fiery feeling it ignited in his throat and gut. "Would that what you say was true. I just received a priority message via a courier droid that indicated Kirtan Loor, an Intelligence agent, is being sent here by Coruscant to investigate. He will brief me on his arrival as to what his mission is, but we both know he is coming here to investigate *me*. He will find me deficient in some way and I will be sent to some other world that is even more wretched than this."

"I understand your alarm, sir."

"I think you do, Eamon, for we are alike, aren't we?"



"How so, sir?"

"We are both unhomed. I am hounded from post to post, with no claim to any world. You, on the other hand, are an Alderaanian, and without a world to call your own."

Eamon stiffened a moment, then nodded. "As you say, sir, neither of us has a home."

Barris' eyes sharpened for a moment. "I have a question I have to ask you, and I intend no disrespect. I've often thought of it, but I have said nothing because you have been so valuable to me. Had my predecessor not left you behind, and had you not made my arrival here so easy, I should have despaired of making any headway. Now, that I will probably be gone from here soon, I think I have little to risk in asking it."

"Sir?"

"The Empire destroyed your world. How is it that you are content laboring for the servants of the Empire?"

Eamon's head came up and his hands disappeared at the small of his back. "Sir, Alderaan was a peaceful world. We were unarmed and our people believed in pacifism. Our leaders chose to rebel. I, and I was not alone, revered order as much as I revered peace and left the planet. As this Rebellion robbed my people of peace, it also robbed them of life. Even so, I am at peace *and* I still revere order. You, my lord, represent order on this world, therefore I am content and honored to be in your service."

"Well said, Eamon. I understand your feelings completely." Barris sat forward and rested his hands on the edge of his black lacquered desk. "The time has come for me to take action. To the Empire, failure to do *something* is seen as inability to do *anything*. I cannot afford that, not with Loor on his way. Though reminiscent of what the Death Star did to your world, I find myself forced to make an example of Dynba Tesc and publicly execute her. Once I do that her companions will scatter in terror. They will know I would have only killed her if she was of no more use to me, which means she gave me their names. We will learn who they are when they flee."

The military prefect smiled coldly. "Let Coruscant deny *that* is decisive action!"

"Indeed, sir, it is decisive, however ... " Standing over by the sideboard, Eamon looked somewhat perplexed.

Barris reined his smile back in. Eamon Yzalli's perspective on Garqi had often proven useful and, not a few times, had steered Barris away from various *faux pas* that would have made his tenure more difficult. "You have an idea?"

"I do, sir, but only because of the question you asked before. It strikes me that if the local Rebels do have a way to defeat narco-interrogation -- as the lack of success with Miss Tesc indicates -- they may be sophisticated enough to wait out your action. More importantly, sir, I think it would be preferential to draw her confederates together, instead of scattering them, as making a martyr out of her would certainly do."

"Yes, I see that, but how, Eamon?"

"Make your declaration about her execution public, my lord. Schedule it for a week from now. This will agitate the Rebels. I will visit her covertly and tell her that I cannot abide seeing her die. I will arrange for her escape."

Barris' black brows collided in the depths of his frown. "You work for me. She will not believe you."

"But she will, sir, for even the most cynical of the Rebels would believe that I, an Alderaanian, have had a change of heart and wish to make amends for not acting against the Empire sooner. In addition, as they say, sir, actions will speak louder than words. I will arrange for her escape and prepare the way for her and her confederates to free the crew of the *Star's Delight*. We will even return to them their cargo of X-wing parts and munitions. The Rebels will all get together in the ship and prepare to leave. Your four TIEs will go after them and end the Rebel threat to Garqi in one dramatic fireball."

The military prefect tipped his snifter up and let the last drop of the choholl drip into his tongue as he considered the plan. "Are you sure my pilots can bring the ship down?"

"They will be able to if we render the shield generator inoperable." The ghost of a smile drifted across Eamon's bearded face as he started to pour more liquor into the empty glass.

"We will disable their blaster cannon, too."

"No, sir."

"No?"

"They need to be operable to provide verisimilitude, sir." Eamon inserted the cut-crystal stopper in the decanter. "If one of your TIEs were shot down, its loss would prove the danger the fleeing Rebels represented to Garqi. Of course, the fact that the Rebels were running away *and* were destroyed will be a lesson here to any who would seek to emulate them."

"I see." Barris admired the way the light shifted and glowed within the choholl. "Then should we not keep the X-wing munitions to prove the *Star's Delight* was smuggling things in the first place, or is this more verisimilitude?"

"We have the initial scans to show the smuggling, sir, and piecing together debris from the destroyed freighter will give this Loor character a great deal to do, occupying his time fully." Eamon smiled weakly. "Finally, sir, I will use delivery of the contraband to secure my passage aboard the ship. This way I will know when it is to leave, so our fighters can be prepared to sweep it from the sky."

"But you will not be on it?"

"No, sir. You will plant a report in our computer system here for one of their codeslicers to ferret out. It will indicate you had me executed for crimes against the Empire -- unspecified, of course, but they will take it to mean I was found out. They will leave the moment that message is accessed, so they will tell us when they are leaving."

"And I alert our fighters to go."

"Exactly, sir." Eamon's face darkened for a moment. "The only difficulty with all this is that we cannot have any trace of what we are doing entered into our computer system here."

"Yes." Barris nodded solemnly and sipped the choholl. "Since their slicers can put stuff into our databases, we know they can pull it out again. Were they to find any indication of our operation, all would be lost."

"Precisely, sir. I shall make the arrangements, sir, if you have no objections."

"Objections? No. I will want reports, however."

"Of course, my lord." Eamon smiled briefly. "For your ears only, until it is time to reveal what you have accomplished in service to the Empire."

* * *

Dynba Tesc felt cold and achy, or at least she thought she did. Curled up on the steel cot, with her back pressed against the rough stones of the cell wall, she knew she should feel uncomfortable. Her body definitely was giving her all the sensory input to tell her she was, in fact, not feeling very good at all.

The problem is that with all the stuff they've pumped into me to pump information out of me, I'm not certain what I know and what I don't know, what is real and unreal. She coiled a blond lock around her right index finger, then sucked on the ends of the hair. A sense of security washed over her briefly, then she angrily flicked the hair way. I am not a child, I can't retreat into childhood things to find comfort.

But retreat she really did want to do, because she had never been more scared in her whole entire life. There was no question in her mind about that -- clear of drugs or dosed to the top of her



cranium. The terror of being arrested and tossed into jail had been enough to make her tell the authorities everything she knew.

The problem was she didn't know anything.

To her the Rebellion had been a distant conflict, one full of romance and heroism. The last True Jedi fighting the monster that destroyed his predecessors and a rogue of a smuggler winning the heart of a princess from a dead world -- these were the things she knew about the New Republic. They had destroyed the Death Stars and the Emperor, but other than a change of the military prefect, those events had no effect on her or her friends at the university.

Then the *Star's Delight* had come to Garqi and had been taken for smuggling supplies to Rebels. She and others she met on the computer comnets -- in temporary areas they sliced open and let close after the conversations were done -- had mentioned suspicions that the New Republic had agents on Garqi. Dynba had found that prospect thrilling and not a little scary. People speculated about all sorts of things concerning the *Delight*, and a natural linkage was made between it and the phantom X-wing that had been reported flying at night all over Garqi.

Then she met Xeno. He sliced his way into one of the covert conversations -- marking him as being better at codeslicing than anyone in the Imperial Security outfit on Garqi. Though he never said it, from his name and the fact that he only showed up after the *Delight's* capture, Dynba concluded he was one of the *Delight's* crew that the local authorities had failed to pick up.

Xeno organized her and her byte-friends, keeping them all anonymous. She never knew what she'd find on her datapad once she linked into the planetary network, but it was always an adventure. Xeno showed her and the others how to graft slogans and graphics into the system, so datapad screens everywhere in the comnet would get New Republic messages at random intervals.

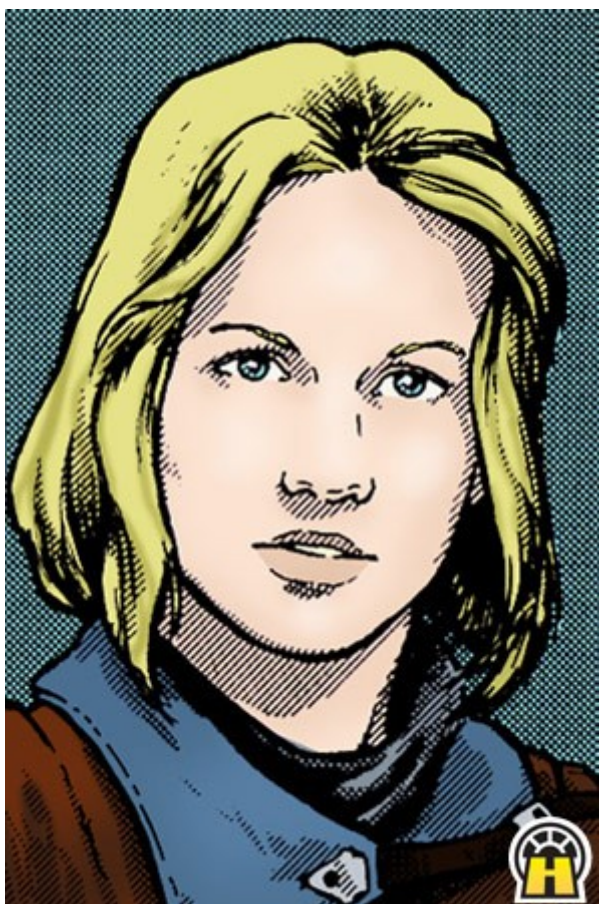
The shock and the outrage, as voiced by her parents and their friends, was wonderful. Dynba had struggled numerous times to maintain a straight face when some *atrocitiy* was being described to her by her apoplectic father, all the while knowing she'd composed the slogan and aimed it to hit his computer first. Doing things like that marked the highest point in her personal rebellion against his authority, and she found planning and executing new code assaults rather cathartic.

Dynba had long held the opinion that Xeno was grooming her and the others for something bigger -- possibly the liberation of the *Delight* even -- but she wanted to do something more. Abandoning the virtual realm of computers, she went out and bought a can of paint. In big, sloppy red letters she wrote "The death of a Tyrant is the triumph of justice!" on the side of the Imperial Court building in the heart of the capital, Pesktda.

It had not occurred to her until later -- about the time the local constabulary was putting her in binders -- that having the store mix up a precise shade of red and charging the purchase to her personal account was not exactly the way to maintain her anonymity. The constabulary seemed to think her boldness meant she was dangerous and the interrogation to which she was subjected had been ruthless and efficient. Her lack of substantive answers angered her questioners and she knew she was in very serious trouble.

The door to her cell hissed open and the lights came up slowly. A small man with blond hair and beard entered and descended the metal-lattice steps to the floor. He turned back and gestured toward an unseen guard. The door clanked down, leaving her alone with this man wearing the uniform of the prefect's personal staff. She thought she recognized him, but she could attach no name to his face.

Dynba drew her legs up and tried to wedge herself more deeply into the corner of the cell. "I don't know any more."



The man nodded. "I know, child." He sank down in a squat, bringing his eye level down to hers. "It is my sad duty to tell you that Prefect Barris has decided to have you executed for your crime."

"What?" Dynba gulped air. "He can't."

"Oh, but he can." The man's green-eyed gaze flicked down toward the floor, giving her a moment to recover herself, then he looked back up. "I, on the other hand, cannot stand by and let this happen."

"What are you saying?" She thought she heard sincerity in his voice, and read it in his eyes, but the clothes he wore and the fact that a guard had followed his direction argued against any compassion on his part. The fact that he was there and talking to her at all made her wary of a trick. "You work for him. You won't help me."

The man broke off his stare and color rose to his cheeks. "Please, this is difficult for me as it is."

"Were I not here I might be more considerate. You work for a monster."

"I know." His hands balled into fists. "I am his personal aide."

"You! You are Eamon Yzalli!"

"I am."

"Then you are here to trick me." Dynba let her anger flow fully into her voice. "You should be ashamed of yourself."

Eamon sighed loudly. "I am."

"What?"

"I am ashamed." He swallowed hard. "I should have seen sooner that to which I have chosen to be blind -- the Empire corrupts people. I denied this truth and my denial is a crime that makes me complicit in the death of my homeworld, Alderaan. I came here and served here in hopes of forgetting. Then, when Prefect Barris was installed, I made myself a buffer between his capriciousness and the people of Garqi. Even now I tried to get him to moderate your punishment, but to no avail. I cannot allow your death to be upon my head, so I have chosen to act against him and for you."

Dynba shook her head to clear her brain of the buoyant hope bubbling up into it. "What can you do?"

A broad smile split Eamon's beard and in that moment Dynba thought him just a little bit handsome. *Like a hero of the New Republic.*

"What I can do and will do is this: I will arrange for your liberation. You will have approximately two days in which to execute a rescue of the *Star's Delight* crew. You and your confederates will board the ship and leave with it. Garqi is no longer safe for you."

His eyes narrowed. "Captain Nootka will need things to trade if he is going to resupply the ship and get to the New Republic. I will arrange for the contraband he smuggled here to be placed aboard -- I can tell the workers we want the evidence replaced in the compartments to show an Imperial Intelligence agent how we found it. They will believe that and it will save us having to move it ourselves."

Dynba's blue eyes widened. "You're coming with us?"

Eamon nodded solemnly. "I can cover *your* escape, but once the ship gets away there would be no concealing my part in all of this. When you are set to go, have one of your slicers get into the Imperial comnet and leave me a message as to where and when I should meet you.

"I'll do it myself." Dynba swung her legs over the edge of the cot and her toes touched the cold floor. "What you're doing, the people you lost on Alderaan would be proud."

Eamon closed his eyes and nodded. "It is my hope you are correct." He reached out and took her hand in his, gently stroking warmth back into her flesh. "You only have to endure this prison for a few hours more, then you shall be free."

She gripped his hand tightly. "And soon after that, *we* shall be free!"

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Barris raised a nearly empty glass in Eamon's direction. "I salute you, Eamon. It seems as if everything is going perfectly."

"Yes, sir. Dynba Tesc is secreted away, bringing her confederates together to free the *Delight* and its crew. She is also altering her appearance so she can claim to be Kirtana Loor, Imperial Intelligence agent, and take the *Delight's* crew from custody without having to notify you for authorization. Several landspeeders have been organized for transport."

"And the *Delight* is ready?"

The small man nodded solemnly. "Using TIE pilots as workers was difficult, but once I explained the necessity of limiting knowledge of the operation to them, they agreed they were the best people for doing the job. The X-wing munitions are on board the *Delight*, though the spare parts appear to have been pilfered. As a skilled technician call convert them to work in Incom's T-47 airspeeder, my assumption is that someone in property storage gave himself a bonus. I have a few leads in that regard."

"We will deal with him, later." Barris snorted, drank and set his glass down. "The shields on the ship are disabled?"

"Yes, sir. We replaced a duplex circuit with its triplex equivalent."

"But a codepatch will allow them to bring the shields up."

"Yes, sir, but an initial diagnostic run on the ship will report the circuits as complete. Only when they discover the failure will they begin to look for the triplex. At that point slicing the proper sequence out of it will take approximately an hour."

The Prefect tapped a finger against the empty rim of his snifter. "An hour they will not have."

"Precisely, sir." Eamon refilled the glass with choholl.

"While you have been busy, Eamon, so have I," Barris winked at his man. "I have composed the report about your execution."

"Not on the system, sir?"

Barris smiled in response to the urgency in Eamon's voice. "No, of course not." He tapped the fingers of his right hand against the side of his white-haired head. "I have it all up here. You were terminated for 'anti-Imperial activity.'"

"Very good, sir."

"I may modify it. I want it to be perfect."

"I am certain it will be more than suitable, sir."

"I thought I would enter it into the computer just around sunset tomorrow. Things should be ready by then?"

"Yes, sir. Agent Loor will be arriving then, so he should see the pursuit and how you handle it."

"Excellent." Barris hefted the glass and raised it again in a salute. "The destruction of the *Delight* should make for great entertainment. I think I will have some friends in to watch."

Eamon nodded solemnly. "Very good, sir. I had already requested the kitchen prepare suitable refreshments for a gathering of ten. Will that be sufficient, sir?"

"Quite, Eamon." Barris sipped his choholl and smiled. "You anticipate my desires as well as my needs. What would I do without you?"

"A hypothetical question, sir." Eamon's expression became placid, "One hopes there is never need to answer it."

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Her now-brown hair pulled back into a tight bun at the back of her head, Dynba stepped from the first landspeeder and tugged at the hem of her uniform jacket. She marched crisply to the door of the local

detention center and drew from the jacket's breast pocket what looked to be an ordinary rank cylinder. She touched it against the I/O port beside the door.

Somehow, above the thundering of her heart, she heard a click and the door withdrew upward. At the other end of the short corridor she saw a guard standing behind a transparisteel shield look at her, then at the image on the screen of his datapad and back again. As he did so the blood drained from the man's face.

His clear anxiety gave Dynba a chance to conquer her own fear. Eamon had assured her that the rank cylinder he had given her would identify her as an Imperial Intelligence agent sent out from Coruscant to inspect Garqi. It made her Kirtana Loor and made her answerable to no one on the planet. A word from her and anyone could be sent to Kessel to mine spice while awaiting interrogation. "You will be someone they fear as much as you fear them. Use it and you will dominate them," he had told her.

And use it I shall. Keeping her steps crisp, and relishing the click of leather on stone, she approached the guard. "Are the prisoners ready for transfer?" She let the lilt of the common Core-dweller accent enter her voice, and underscored her words with impatient indignation.

The man's lower lip started quivering. "Transfer? I know nothing of... "

"Of course you don't." She drew her black leather gloves off by tugging on each finger in succession, then slapped them against the palm of her left hand. "The inefficiency of Rim-world officials should not surprise me, should it?"

"Well, I ... "

"You were not going to venture an *opinion*, were you? What is your name?"

The man smiled weakly. "Which prisoners were those, my lady?"

"The crew of the *Star's Delight*." Her eyes became slits and she forced her nostrils to flare. "Returning them to the scene of the crime -- you *do* know about using that investigative technique, don't you?"

The man furiously punched keys on his datapad. "Well, I... "

"Of course you don't -- the technique predates the Emperor's murder by a year, so it hasn't gotten out here yet. You probably think he is still alive."

"Yes, my lady, I mean, no... "

Dynba barked a harsh laugh. "You don't know what you mean. Why the Rebels would strike at this witspare compost heap, I do not know."

"No, my lady."

The door to her right buzzed and slid into the ceiling. Three bedraggled figures, a small female Sullustan, a morose giant of a Duros and a Devaronian with several missing teeth and a broken horn shuffled through the doorway. They wore binders on their wrists and had another pair hobbling them. Each individual looked away from the dying sunlight pouring through the open doorway to the street.

Dynba looked up at the Duros. "Captain Lai Nootka, you and your crew are charged with treason. I am a representative of Imperial Intelligence and the resolution of your case is in my hands. Come with me."

She led the prisoners from the detention center and waved the landspeeders forward. Each prisoner was secured in a different speeder, then they headed off toward the hangar where the *Star's Delight* had been kept in impound.

The vehicles followed one after the other all the way to the spaceport. Dynba regretted not being able to tell the crew they were safe and with friends, but doing so would have put the mission in jeopardy. If the crew did not look scared and defeated as they rode through the streets of Pesktda, someone could note their happy demeanor and that would attract attention to them and the operation. Eamon had pointed out that people tended not to pay too much attention to those who appear to be doomed because they might attract attention in doing so. Even before he'd said anything, she'd known that was true.

In keeping with her role as Loor, she met the gazes of the curious and held them until the others turned away. *I don't like making people afraid, but it is the only way to save these people and Eamon. And myself and my*

friends, too. She kept her stare hard and terrifying throughout the ride until the speeders slid into the shade of the hangar.

The second her landspeeder stopped, she loosed her hair and shook it out over her shoulders. "Open the binders." She pointed at Nootka. "The ship is ready to go, complete with your X-wing munitions. Start pre-flight. The only thing on this world that can stop us from getting out of here are four TIE starfighters. Is that a problem?"

The Duros rubbed at his wrists as his driver tinkered with the binders on the starpilot's ankles. "We are matched for speed. We have hyperdrive, they do not. We have a blaster cannon, they have lasers. We have shields, they do not. I think we are not far from freedom"

"Dynba, you did it!" A Twi'lek woman came running down the gangplank of the long Corellispace Gymsnor-3 Freighter. With her head tails twitching excitedly, she brandished her datapad. "No alarms, no traces. We're clear."

"Good." Dynba looked past Arali Dil's shoulder, then frowned. "Are Eamon or Xeno here?"

Arali shook her head. "No one has been here except Sihha and me."

Dynba frowned. Prior to departing for the prison, Dynba had left a message with Eamon telling him when they planned to leave, and another to Xeno inviting him to reunite with his crew and escape. She had expected both of them to be present when she returned and she had especially wanted to see the look on Eamon's face when he realized his plan had worked perfectly.

"Arali, link into the comnet and see if you have anything from Xeno or Eamon."

"Right."

The Twi'lek and a Bothan had turned out to be the only non-humans in Xeno's circle. The circle itself only had seven members, not counting Xeno, and all of them had thought it funny that even being so few in number, they had caused enough trouble for the Empire to send an Intelligence agent out from the Core to Garqi to deal with them.

Dynba had briefed everyone on their role in the Great Evacuation. Because of the Empire's xenophobic bias, neither Arali nor Sihha, the Bothan, would pass for Imperial officers, so they had remained with the ship while the five humans used the speeders to get the prisoners. Now back in the hangar, everyone hurried aboard the *Delight* and prepared for departure.

"Interesting."

Dynba glanced away from the hangar opening and toward Arali. "What is?"

"Message to all of us from Xeno. He says his work here isn't done. He'll catch up with us later and we will all laugh about this."

"I'd prefer it if he came with us. I hope they don't need him to run the ship."

"Sihha can fill in -- he was an astrogation student here."

"Right." Dynba felt a heavy darkness begin to spread from her stomach out to her limbs and stab straight up into her heart. "Nothing from Eamon."

"By the foul hearts of the Sith!"

Dynba whirled at the sound of Arali's voice. "What?"

The Twi'lek held her datapad out and Dynba snatched it from her trembling hands. "By order of Prefect Mosh Barris, at the conclusion and in resolution of his personal investigation into the actions of Eamon Yzalli, ordered and carried out the discreation of an enemy of the state." Her voice dropped to a whisper as she read. "He's dead."

The datapad slipped from her hands, but the Twi'lek deftly caught it, then started pulling on Dynba's arm. "Come on, we have to go."

Dynba pointed back toward the doorway. "Maybe it's a trick."

"The Empire doesn't play jokes, Dynba. Eamon's dead." Arali pulled her friend up the gangplank.

"Let's get out of here. We'll mourn Eamon on the trip, then when we get to the New Republic, we'll find a way to get even with the Empire."

* * *

Barris felt the comlink clipped to his belt vibrate like the warning scales on a Gorgarian buzzadder. He opened his arms to take in the whole of the crowd in his reception room, then pointed them toward the eastern balcony. "My friends, I have just been informed that the Rebels have taken the bait in the trap that had been set for them. If you will join me outside, I think you will find their end a spectacular disaster."

Pulling the comlink from his belt, he thumbed it on. "Garqi Eagles, you are clear to intercept and destroy your target."

* * *

Arali got Dynba into one of the jumpseats in the cockpit and strapped her in. "Barris got our last passenger, Captain. You better move now."

The Duros nodded to his mouse-eared pilot. The Sullustan chittered her way through a checklist. The low hum of the repulsorlift drives filled the ship, then a gentle tremble ran through it as the sublight drives began to push it forward, up and out of the hangar. The nose of the ship came around to the east, facing the ship away from the sun and on a course that meant they would be moving away from the star's mass as they left the planet. That would permit them to enter hyperspace faster, and everyone on the ship knew speed was a virtue when escape was the object of the exercise.

Through the forward viewport Dynba got a spectacular look at the lights of Pesktda. She found the city where she grew up quaint and even beautiful, with lights winking on and off as gentle breezes stirred the dark, leafy canopy that covered everything. Part of her felt the loss of leaving the place of her birth, but that regret was nothing compared to the pain she felt over Eamon's murder.

The *Star's Delight* picked up speed and shot out of the spaceport. The Sullustan pilot kept the ship at a steady angle of ascent. As they broke above the shadow of the world, sunlight lit the sky. It passed quickly as the atmosphere thinned, then the stars above stopped shimmering and just hung there like distant jeweled sparks on the inside of a vast black bowl.

Captain Nootka hunched forward over a screen. "We have four starfighters in our wake. Shields to full in the aft arc."

The Sullustan hit a button on the console, but it remained dark. She hit it again, then shrieked.

Nootka reached over and hit the button himself. "Saricia, we have not shields."

"Invert and give me a shot." The Devaronian's bass voice came from above the companionway that led into the cockpit. Dynba looked back and saw an open hatchway that allowed access beyond the passage's ceiling.

Arali tightened down her restraining straps. "The blaster cannon turret is up top. We have to invert for him to shoot at targets coming from behind and below, otherwise he'll hit the cargo pods."

"Not a good design, is it?"

Nootka turned around and gave Dynba a hard stare. "This is a freighter, not a warship. Saricia is good."

"How good? Good enough to stop them?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

The Duros shook his head. "If I am wrong, I will not live long in regret." He hit some more switches on the console. "You said the ship was in working order."

"That's what I was told. Eamon said ... " Dynba's jaw dropped open. "He's not here."

The tips of the Twi'lek's headtails shook with a start. "We were set up, Dynba, set up to die by Eamon Yzalli." She flashed sharp pegteeth. "I hope part of Xeno's work on Garqi is killing him."

Nootka glanced at his screen, then shook his head. "I would have hoped the situation would not get worse. We have a fifth ship closing fast." The ship shook violently and sparks shot through the companionway, while the thrummed rumble of Saricia's return-fire filled the cockpit. "Our armor will hold them back for a little while, but not long."

"Can we make the jump to lightspeed?"

"In the time we have left?" Nootka asked. "Not even if I knew where we were going and had the course already plotted into the nav computer. It looks now that where we are going is to the grave."

* * *

Corran Horn eased the X-wing's throttle forward and his speed started to climb faster as he left Garqi's atmosphere. "You should have told me sooner, Whistler, that's all I'm saying. It doesn't matter now, though. We can talk about it later. Now we have to get those TIEs."

The droid replied in a muted whistle that Corran found almost as depressing as the four-to-one odds on the fight. *Not how I wanted to do this, but I have no choice.*

Corran hit the thumb-switch on the X-wing's stick. The proton torpedo targeting system came up and painted a big yellow box around the slowest of the TIE starfighters. "That's target one. Give me the next closest one and mark it as target two."

Whistler complied instantly, then keened a question.

"Yes, if they're in range, get me comlink contact." Corran heard the hiss of static from the speakers in his helmet, then a clear channel opened up. "*Star's Delight*, the key-code for your shields is 349XER34, repeat 349XER34."

"Who is this?"

"Someone who just gave you your shields back. Eamon Yzalli sold you out. He's dead. What he knew, I know."

In the background he heard a voice excitedly shout, "It's Xeno!" The deeper voice, the one he decided belonged to Lai Nootka, overrode the shout. "349XER34 is the code."

"Exactly." Corran smiled. "Tell your gunner not to shoot the X-wing and I'll make his life easier. X-wing out."

Whistler tooted triumphantly.

"Not yet, buddy, not yet. Give me target one and lighten my acceleration compensator. I want to feel it when I move around." Nudging the stick over and back, he settled the box around the lagging TIE. The droid beeped intermittently as he tried to get a target lock. The target box went from yellow to red at the same moment Whistler's tone went solid and Corran hit the trigger.

The proton torpedo shot away from the X-wing and curved only slightly to port before it slammed into the TIE's ball-cockpit. The explosion shattered the starfighter's hexagonal solar panels. It sent their shards spinning away from the roiling, red-gold plasma ball spreading out from where the cockpit had once been.

"Acquire two."



Brief beeps melded into an uninterrupted tone as Corran hit a pedal and the etheric rudder brought the X-wing's nose around to port. He hit the trigger again and saw a proton torpedo burn into and through the second TIE. The torpedo hit it solidly on one of the solar panels and blasted through. The projectile glanced down, crushing the fighter's ion engine exhaust port and clipped the far side solar panel before exploding. The TIE whirled off on a wobbly course before exhaust pressure from the engines tore the ship apart from the inside.

"Two down." Corran flipped his weapons control over to laser fire and linked the lasers for dual-fire. "Whistler, even out the shields." The droid complied with the order as Corran brought the X-wing up in a quarter snap-roll. The maneuver stood the fighter on its port stabilizer foils. Tugging back on the stick, he brought the nose up, and cruised onto the tail of one of the two remaining TIEs. It had broken left while its wing man had gone right - a strategy that was usually discouraged and went a long way toward confirming Corran's opinion of the Garqi garrison.

Whistler's excited hooting made Corran look up at his rear sensor monitor. *Coming in behind me. Not as bad as I thought.* "I see him, Whistler. Now you know why I didn't want to fight them at all."

The TIE in front of him began a slow loop to starboard. The move was slow enough that Corran was tempted to follow and light the ship up, but he knew giving in to temptation would have a price. *In this case it will be the TIE back there shortening the loop and melting my ship's tail. Not for me.*

Corran chopped his thrust back and pulled the stick to his breastbone. He looped the X-wing, then punched the throttle full forward and rolled out to port. That dropped him in on an attack vector to the TIE that had been following him. Tightening up on the trigger, he tracked ruby laser bolts across one solar panel, through the cockpit and into the other solar panel.

The TIE didn't explode. It rolled slowly to port, little blue tendrils of energy playing over its myriad surfaces. The X-wing overshot the ship, so Corran rolled and dove down through a loop to keep an eye on it. The TIE did not react and just continued spiraling along on its previous course, bound for a fiery collision with Garqi's atmosphere.

Pilot's gone, ship's running on momentum. Corran shivered, imagining for one second what it was like to spend your last seconds of life in pain, in a breached cockpit with all the atmosphere leaking out while cold poured in. *Not the way I want to go.*

Whistler's indignant yowl and the hiss of laser fire splashing against his aft shields shocked Corran. He immediately hit the right rudder pedal, whipping the X-wing's tail to port and out of the line of fire. Pushing the stick hard left, he rolled out to port, then pulled back and brought the ship's nose up and around in a loop. Halfway through that he rolled right and dove, but his sensors showed the TIE was still with him.

Why are the best guys always the last? Corran smiled at his own question. "Because the pilots who are bad die first. They were all probably daydreaming just like you." He sideslipped the X-wing to the right and the TIE followed him.

"Whistler, get me the *Delight* again."

"Nootka here, X-wing."

"Captain, this guy on me is good. Kill your shields and tell your gunner to shoot high."

"We just got our shields back."

"I know. Kill your shields."

"I do not understand."

"You will."

Corran rolled the fighter out to port, then kept a light hand on the stick. Nudging it left and right, up and back, he made the X-wing dance almost unpredictably. After every third or fourth move, when the ship had drifted to port, he'd push the stick down, then up right and right again. He'd level out and fly straight for a couple of seconds, then after that the random pattern would begin again.

When he saw the TIE begin to anticipate his pattern, Corran pulled the X-wing back through a big loop and dove straight in on an intercept course for the *Delight*. "Full shields aft, Whistler." Corran dipped and jerked the fighter through its pattern. Laser fire came in from the *Delight*, passing over his ship, but only by a margin of decimeters.

The TIE kept to Corran's tail as the X-wing turned and swooped down into a run that took it from bow to stern on the *Delight*. The TIE came in tight and sank below the level of the ship's fire. *He's low enough to strike sparks! This Imp's very good.* Corran smiled. *I gotta hope I'm better.*

As Corran's pattern ended, the X-wing drifted into a gentle glide along the *Delight's* spine. The TIE dropped in behind him and lined up for a shot. The first laser blasts hit the X-wing's aft shield and rocked Corran in the cockpit. *Now or never!*

Corran killed his thrust and cut his repulsorlift drives in at full strength. Acceleration jammed him down in the cockpit couch as the X-wing bounced up and away from the freighter's mass. The TIE starfighter shot through beneath the X-wing, pulling up abruptly to miss the freighter's engine cowling.

Punching the throttle forward and killing the lift drives, Corran sailed in on the TIE's aft. His targeting box went green. He pulled the trigger and filled the last TIE with laser fire.

The scarlet energy darts shredded the ship, puncturing the cockpit and melting their way through the twin ion engines. The TIE exploded brilliantly. The glittering plasma sphere burned like a star going nova, then imploded, leaving the void in its wake.

"X-wing, this is *Delight*. May we put our shields back up?"

"Affirmative, *Delight*." Corran smiled. "Captain Nootka, have you got a course plotted out of here?"

"We have a course, X-wing."

"If you don't mind, I'll slave my navigation to yours and tag along. After all, I still owe you for the debris extractor."

"Consider the debt paid, X-wing, but come on along." Corran heard gratitude in the Duros captain's voice. "This adventure will be a tale to tell, and I would have you there when I first tell it."

* * *

Prefect Mosh Barris bowed graciously amid the applause from his guests. The series of bright explosions and the spectacular light show of debris streaking through the upper atmosphere had been far more than he expected. *If you arranged that on purpose, Eamon, I shall give you rewards in excess of what I had already planned.*

He held a hand up. "Thank you, thank you all. I am pleased you have enjoyed how we have eliminated the Rebel threat to Garqi." Barris smiled proudly. "I was the architect of this event, but another carried it out. My aide, Eamon Yzalli. Eamon, where are you?"

"Indeed, where *is* he?"

Barris' head came up as a sharp voice asked the question from the balcony doorway. "Who are you?"

A tall, hatchet-faced man stooped slightly to make it through the door, then fixed Barris with a harsh stare. "I am Kirtan Loor, Imperial Intelligence. You have been expecting me?"

"Of course." Barris gestured up at the sky, spraying choholl from the glass in his hand. "You came too late to see what happened to the Rebels."

"Oh, I think I already know what happened to them." The Imperial officer's lip curled in a sneer. "As I came into the system, I was sent a report by this Eamon Yzalli. It indicates you arranged for the escape of the local Rebel organization on the *Star's Delight*. The report indicates this action was the preliminary gambit in your bid to usurp Governor Tadrin and transfer Garqi to the Rebel Alliance."

Barris' stomach slowly wriggled into a knot. Kirtan Loor reminded him of a young Grand Moff Tarkin, and the resemblance did nothing to stop the fear flooding Barris' mind. "This is wrong. This cannot be. Eamon must have planned this. Ask him, the accusations are not true."

"I would ask him, but I cannot find him." Loor's blue eyes narrowed. "An appendix to his report said he feared for his life at your hands. When I arrived here I read that you had ordered and carried out his elimination. That message came from you, directly, I've checked."

"Yes, but it was all part of the plan, don't you see?"

Kirtan Loor shook his head solemnly. "I don't see what you want me to see. What I do see is a Rebel collaborator with much to tell me about the enemy."

"But I know nothing about them."

"I doubt that very sincerely, Barris." Loor smiled with a cold superiority that weakened Barris' knees and sent his glass crashing to the floor. "By the time your interrogation is barely started, you will wish you knew even more, so you could tell me everything. You will be surprised how much information there truly is in your *nothing* -- and you will learn to dread your punishment whenever you seek to feign ignorance as a shield."

* * *

Corran had fully expected the look of surprise on Dynba Tesc's face when she first saw him. "Greetings, Dynba. I'm glad you made it. I apologize for the rough time the *Delight* had."

The war between horror and joy in her expression even proved entertaining, though the ultimate victor in the struggle proved to be a stunned look. "Y-you're dead ... at least you said you were dead. You're Eamon Yzalli, but you can't be."

Corran winced as hurt entered her voice. He scratched at his beard for a second, then shrugged. "I'm sorry for the deception. I intended for you to assume Barris had killed me and take off. I knew the TIEs would head out after you. I wanted to use you as a diversion one more time, so I could get away while the TIEs were busy with you."

A Twi'lek walked up behind Dynba and draped a head tail over her shoulder protectively. "The TIEs almost did us in because you disabled the shields. You tried to have us killed."

"Not my intention at all." Corran sighed. "I meant to have a message sent to you that would give you the code to bring the shields back up. I wanted to blame the shield tampering on Barris and have you protected, but the old fool went and deactivated my message account when he entered his death declaration about Eamon."

Dynba dug a gentle elbow into the Twi'lek's midsection. "Arali, if he wanted us dead, he'd not have come after the TIEs and given us the code. He still could have gotten away."

"Right," Corran nodded. "Exactly."

"So what did you mean about using us as a diversion 'one more time?'"

"Setting up the *Star's Delight's* escape allowed me to get the spare parts I needed for the X-wing. I told Barris they had been stolen from storage, but I really just had the guys who helped me load the things put them in the back of my speeder. They were the TIE pilots, so now we're the only ones who know where the parts ended up."

Dynba smiled. "The parts, of course. The phantom X-wing flights ended about a month before the *Delight* showed up and was taken."

"I needed a debris extractor."

"So, then, you're Xeno. You got us together to eventually steal those parts for you."

"No, I'm Corran Horn, late of the Corellian Security Force." He smiled as Whistler came rolling up and patted the droid affectionately on the dome. "The droid here was Xeno."

Arali's head tails twitched with surprise. "A droid organized our little group?"

Whistler chirped emphatically and Corran beamed. "He worked with me in CorSec. In addition to astrogation programming, he's a fairly good codeslicer and had a facility for putting together sting operations. He was grooming you to get the parts for me; but he didn't mention it because he knows I don't really want anything to do with the Rebellion and the New Republic."

"It is a little late for that." Captain Nootka came walking over with two Republic officers in tow. "Helping us escape will lead Barris to figure out who you were, and you will be branded a Rebel."

"I don't think so. Barris is in plenty of trouble himself." Corran smiled broadly. "I once worked with Kirtan Loor, the Imperial Intelligence agent heading in to Garqi. This beard and dye job wouldn't have fooled him, so I had to move. That's the reason this whole operation got put together and involved you and your friends, Dynba. I would have kept you out of it, but I couldn't."

She shook her head. "You may think that, Corran, and may even want to believe it, but I think you couldn't leave us behind to face Barris' wrath if you weren't around to moderate him."

Maybe you're right, Dynba, but there is no true way of knowing. He nodded slowly. "Loor isn't the brightest of Imperial agents, but he can solve a case when it's handed to him in a package, and the package I left behind neatly implicates Mosh Barris in treason and Eamon Yzalli's murder. I should be clear."

One of the New Republic officers pointed at the X-wing. "That fighter just burned down four TIEs?"

Nootka tapped Corran on the shoulder. "He had the kills, Captain Dromath."

The other Rebel whistled. "They never got through your shields." Corran shrugged. "Recharging shields is easier than finding paint to match."

The first officer nodded. "Look, Horn, I heard you say you don't want anything to do with the Rebellion or New Republic, but we need fighters like you."

"I'm not a joiner, Captain." Corran shook his head, then frowned down at Whistler when the droid jeered. "All I want is to be left alone. Your fight isn't my fight."



Dromath shrugged. "Perhaps not, but you're smart enough to know the Empire won't leave you alone. You will fight them, just as you did in getting these folks out of Garqi. If you have to fight them, doing so with allies is a lot better than doing it alone."

"He's right, Corran." Dynba reached out and gave Corran's left hand a squeeze. "The New Republic needs you."

"I don't know."

"Not an easy decision to make, true." Dromath smiled. "Think about this, though -- orders came through letting us know Rogue Squadron is being reformed and brought back to active duty. Any pilots who think they're good enough to join are encouraged to apply. From what Nootka said, you're good enough to at least look into it."

Whistler squawked derisively.

Corran rapped a knuckle on the droid's dome. "I'm better than that, and you know it. I could be one of the hottest pilots you've got. Of course, I'd need a new R2 unit."

The droid's blatted reply prompted laughter from everyone. Corran suddenly realized, as he heard their voices all mix together, that he'd not heard good, honest laughter in all the time he'd been on the run and in service on Garqi. Among the Imperials and their citizenry there was always something held back, a hedge against self betrayal. *People couldn't let themselves go for fear someone might think ill of them and report them to the authorities.*

He thought for a moment. He knew all he really wanted was to be left alone, but Dromath had been right -- the Empire would never leave him alone. Even if they were not there directly, even if Loor wasn't hot on his trail, the Empire's shadow would touch him except in places where it could not survive.

Among the Rebels. In the New Republic.

"As being left alone isn't an option, I guess I might as well choose the folks with whom I have to co-exist." Corran slowly smiled and extended his hand to Captain Dromath. "If I heard you correctly, I think Whistler and I just might have an interest in joining Rogue Squadron."

"It won't be easy, Mister Horn."

"From what I've heard, Captain, it wouldn't be Rogue Squadron if joining was easy. But easy I don't want." Corran winked at Nootka and smiled at Dynba. "Remember, I've just left a backwater world where my droid led a Rebel cell and I helped evacuate enemies of the state, all the while plotting to bring down the military prefect. After that, the only place I'll find enough excitement to suit Whistler here is with the folks who have two Death Star kills to their credit. If I were willing to settle for anything less, I'd be joining the Imperial Navy and thinking it was a good career move."

* * *

It occurred to Barris, as guards dragged him toward the interrogation chamber, that his ears had been as deaf to Dynba Tesc's protests of ignorance as Loor's would be to his. It struck him as ironic that his descent had begun when he had done nothing on a world far away, and it would end because he *knew* nothing on a world far away. He sought to share this insight with the men beside him, but it would only leave his throat disguised as hesitant laughter, punctuated by sobs.

And, somehow, he knew they understood.